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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA'S SPECIAL BRAND OF ISLAM

[11](#). (SBU) SUMMARY. The Ambassador met with the Secretary General of the Nigeria Supreme Council

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for Islamic Affairs Lateef Adegbite in early July to discuss the nature of Islam in Nigeria, including procedural safeguards inherent in Sharia law, the urgent need to restart of the polio vaccination campaign in the north, and religious reconciliation. Adegbite's outspoken support for Obasanjo may reflect that they are both Yoruba and from the same district. Adegbite distanced the practice of Islam in Nigeria from terrorism, emphasizing the religious tolerance that characterizes Islam in Yorubaland and, he said, other parts of the nation. Adegbite represents the moderate, tolerant Yoruba brand of Islam that is anathema to the more fundamentalist Islamic thought found in northern Nigeria. END SUMMARY.

[12](#). (SBU) The Ambassador met with the Secretary General of the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Dr. Lateef Adegbite on July 1 in Lagos. Adegbite opened by saying that Nigeria is making progress on the issues of Sharia law and Muslim/Christian reconciliation. Adegbite asserted that the nature of Islam in Nigeria has nothing to do with terrorism. He expressed concern over a perceived "blacklisting" of Nigerian Muslims as supporters of terrorism by outsiders. Adegbite emphasized that Nigeria's own brand of Islam is non-violent, and that its Muslims have never harbored or supported secret patrons of terrorism. Adegbite said assistance from various organizations outside Africa to build mosques and schools has dried up as a result of Nigerian Islam's false association with terrorism. Adegbite underscored that the practice of Islam in Nigeria is different from other parts of the Muslim world.

[13](#). (SBU) Adegbite offered his historical perspective on Nigeria's religious conflicts over the past decade. He recalled conflict over Sharia law in 1981 in Kaduna and Jos, which overflowed into Plateau State. He stated that current religious disturbances are often political or ethnic in nature, like those past events.

[14](#). (SBU) Adegbite discussed the current conflict in Plateau, which began in 2001. He suggested that the conflict stems from the indigenous population's monopoly hold on government jobs that excludes more recent immigrants to the state. Adegbite described the indigenous communities of Plateau as mostly Christian and the immigrants as mostly Muslim. He stated that the immigrants, feeling disenfranchised, vent their anger by attacking rival religious institutions. While the conflict in Plateau appears to be religious, its root causes are rivalries between "indigenes" and newcomers that are often expressed in ethnic and religious terms. As for the historical conflicts between the indigenous farmers and immigrant herders, economic competition and employment are also important underlying factors.

RELIGIOUS RECONCILIATION

[15](#). (SBU) Adegbite discussed the activities of the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council, a Muslim and Christian group with a mission of religious reconciliation. Founded five years ago by Muslim imams and Christian preachers to intervene positively in the Sharia crisis, it is a grassroots effort by 25 Christians and 25 Muslims, the highest-ranking religious leaders in Nigeria, who work to defuse religious issues. The Council's coordinator is Professor Obaje, President Obasanjo's Chaplain. The Sultan of Sokoto is also a member of the Council.

[16](#). (SBU) Adegbite cited the practice of Islam in Yorubaland as an example of successful religious

coexistence both with Christianity and traditional Yoruba religion. He characterized the Yoruba way of thinking as open and tolerant, and Yoruba adherents of Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religions are united by a strong sense of common ethnicity.

17. (SBU) Adegbite contrasted the differences between the political roots of Islam in Nigeria and the Arab world. While Nigerian Muslim scholars trained in Saudi Arabia tend to be more conservative and traditionalist in their practice of Islam, they are reluctant to criticize the conventional practice of Islam in Nigeria. Adegbite said Arab influence is limited because traditional leaders-sultans, sheiks, and emirs--fulfill both religious and civil functions in the region. Adegbite asserted that they exercise firm control over the North. He also remarked that these leaders have very close relationships with the United States and the United Kingdom.

SHARIA LAW

18. (SBU) Adegbite asserted there is strong support for the establishment of Sharia law in Nigeria, particularly among the younger population. He said divorce, family, and estate issues are those most often brought into Sharia courts. Adegbite is pleased that Muslims in Nigeria have the right to choose their own legal system under the current democratic dispensation. The Ambassador cautioned Adegbite about the human rights repercussions of stoning and amputations as a form of punishment. Adegbite replied that a legal system should not be evaluated solely on the basis of its possible forms of punishment. He pointed to provisions for execution by electric chair, firing squads, and hanging in the statutes of many nations, including the United States. Adegbite went on that these punishments do not necessarily indicate the moral value of the legal system that delivers them. Adegbite said he had offered his legal services as a friend of the court in a sharia case involving possible adultery. (Adegbite did not mention the name of Amina Lawal in the discussion, but that is to whom he was referring.) In his analysis, Adegbite emphasized that since no man had acknowledged the paternity of the child in question, the defendant should not have been found guilty of adultery. Adegbite argued that the case was, therefore, flawed in the terms of Sharia law, and, thus, should have been dismissed - as it was. Adegbite cited as evidence of Sharia's popularity the attendance of two million people in Kano for the public inauguration of Sharia law.

POLIO

19. (SBU) The Ambassador expressed grave concern about the progress of the polio vaccination campaign in Kano. Adegbite replied that he had visited the Kano governor to discuss the issue. Adegbite claimed the governor is not against the vaccination campaign in principle, but the governor will not accept government-sponsored vaccines. He insists that the polio vaccine be from a Muslim supplier. The governor told Adegbite that Kano State authorities had arranged to obtain the vaccine from suppliers in Malaysia or Indonesia and that vaccinations would resume shortly. Adegbite stated that he had cautioned the governor about the negative international image resulting from this issue. Adegbite said he would personally follow up with the governor on the need for the resumption of polio vaccinations in Kano.

PRESIDENT OBASANJO

10. (SBU) Adegbite gave high marks to Obasanjo and his administration. Adegbite stated that Obasanjo, given his military background, is the right man for the job of President. Adegbite said Nigeria's political culture has changed, fueled as it was by the democratic elections of 1999 and 2003. He said the biggest dividend of democracy is the air of freedom that Nigerians now enjoy. Adegbite affirmed that one of Obasanjo's greatest contributions has been his promotion of good international relationships between Nigeria and the rest of the world. (Comment. In a recent press article, Adegbite was quoted as saying that Obasanjo looks "like a successor to Mandela". End comment.)

¶11. (SBU) Adegbite recalled that he and Obasano are both from a district near Abeokuta. Adegbite noted that Abeokuta has disproportionately produced Nigeria's contemporary leaders. He mentioned Anglican Archbishop Peter Akinola, President of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Chief Rotimi Williams, perhaps the leading Lagos attorney, and the late Moshood Abiola, candidate for the presidency. Adegbite attributed Abeokuta's unique distinction to the residual influence of freed slaves who had returned to Africa and founded strong communities in that district. Adegbite mentioned that his own great-grandfather had been a returned slave. The first church in Nigeria was founded in Abeokuta in 1842, marking the beginning of organized Christianity in Nigeria. The early influence of the Christian missionaries and of their schools gave the town an educational lead. The interaction between the returnee communities, the missionaries, and the indigenous population was characterized by an openness and outward-orientation that today's leaders inherited, he concluded.

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT. Adegbite is friendly and well disposed toward the West. The official location of his law practice is in Abuja, and he is often there for his own and NSCIA business. He maintains an office in Lagos, where he works closely with American companies doing business in Nigeria. To show Islam in its most positive light, he has been active publicly on issues of Sharia law, polio, and religious reconciliation. He believes that there are enough procedural and other safeguards in Sharia law to preclude stoning, a view widely held by educated Muslims. Adegbite's support for Obasanjo indicates that ethnic unity may sometimes trump religious difference, especially at the leadership level among Yorubas. Adegbite is a close ally of the traditional northern Muslim establishment. It is their leadership that risks challenge should Islam in Nigeria evolve toward more fundamentalists ways of thinking and practice. Adegbite was unwilling to discuss such fissures within the Muslim community. END COMMENT.

¶13. (U) Ambassador Campbell has cleared this message.

BROWNE